ARTS

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'The Golden Compass', an adaptation of a Philip Pullman novel, stars Nicole Kidman and child actor Dakota Blue Richards, who plays the heroine Lyra

A strange film about polar bears

FILM REVIEW
Igor Toronyi

The Golden Compass

CERT 12A, 113 MINS

It's a strange old film, *The Golden Compass*. It's about polar bears. Polar bears who dress up as Roman soldiers. And fight. Except for one, Iorek, who works in a pub. He's paid in whisky and becomes a dirty great sot. But then he sees the light, and he goes back to fight to be king of the polar bears. A bit like George W Bush. Though Bush never had to lop off Al Gore's jaw in an apocalyptic battle waged on the vast ice sheets of the North Pole. He just went to Alcoholics Anonymous and won an election. Which seems easier.

But lots of other things happen as well. Far too many to remember or care much about. But I'll give it a go.

There's something called dust. Which is not like ordinary household dust – a poor subject for a film – but a sort of anti-matter dust that everything is made up of and everyone is greatly interested in.

Whenever it's mentioned people get mighty angry, the polar bears in particular, I'm not sure why.

Then there's the Magisterium. The Catholic Church. Who are the baddies. You can tell this because the first member you see, Fra Pavel (Simon McBurney), has an ugly comb-over and the bleaky, peaky face of a Victorian parson. The Magisterium want to control things because they are the baddies.

And so they do. They team up with other baddies, the Gobblers. Who are a sort of hapless body of storm troopers, who mess everything up. And die a lot. They steal children for the Magisterium. Again, I'm not sure why. I think to brainwash them.

The enemies of the Magisterium are the kindly scholars. They look like Sigmund Freud. They wear bow ties and suits. The scholars are about the Enlightenment and free thought, the Magisterium about tyranny and superstition. The Magisterium wear cassocks and live in grand Baroque buildings. Like the Vatican.

But it's mainly about polar bears. And about how to make a big mess of a film, I guess.

OK, so call me stupid, but I didn't know what was going on! Why did any of it happen? Why did any of that just occur? I wanted to eat my own fist. I remember that very clearly.

But it wasn't just grumpy old me. Everyone seemed baffled. The consensus was that it sped through far too much, far too fast.

My own preoccupation was that there was both too much explanation and too little. We were given details about certain fatuous groups – the gypsies, for instance, or the Finnish witches – but left in the dark about the motivation and character of almost everyone.

Why do the Magisterium snatch children? Why do they want to control people? Why do the scholars give the eponymous golden compass to the girl Lyra? Ah, now, I haven't said anything yet about Lyra. Let me tell you a bit about Lyra.

I wanted to eat my own fist. I remember that very clearly

I have so far managed to avoid Lyra, played by Dakota Blue Richards, but this is no longer possible.

The Golden Compass could be, I think, the summit of Dakota Blue Richards's short career. For she must be the worst child actor you will ever see. A complete dud. Cruel, perhaps, but there it is.

And her accent, a mockney one, stank. It sounded like she was tuning in and out of Radio Dick van Dyke.

But, getting back to my queries, pray, who are the gypsies? Who are the witches? Why are they Finnish? Why does everyone instinctively join the odious Lyra against the exciting storm-troopers? What have the polar bears got to do with anything?

Presumably, ingeniously, all will be revealed in countless crap sequels. We can but hope and pray.

Praying, by the way, doesn't feature much in the film. Nor does Jesus, nor the New Testament, nor the Sacraments, nor the idea of love thy neighbour, nor God. The Magisterium doesn't seem to do any of things that the Catholic Church actually does. The depiction is a risible old cliché of what extremist liberals wish the Catholic Church were like: a simple, old-fashioned evil. The institution is presented as an unthinking and all-consuming immoral beast, grasping at power eternally and irrepressibly.

Strangely, Philip Pullman's scholars attack this irrational monster using the alethiometer – the golden compass. This has the power to tell you the truth, to foretell prophecies. You just have to stare at it long enough. In a golden mist, the vital clues appear. Hazy images of future happenings.

It's not unlike gazing into a crystal ball. There's no rational search for the truth here. No nerdy experimentation or scientific rigour. Pop open the compass – a lovely compass, I will admit – and believe. Believe in the truth and you will find it. That's the supposedly "anti-religious" message of the film.

The Golden Compass is an over-grown, corn-fed SUV of a turkey. Far more offensive to the film lover than the Christian. And for the temperate polar bear, a damned travesty.

Jewels that sparkle and promise more

BALLET REVIEW
Dennis Chang

Jewels

ROYAL BALLET, ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

This has been a red-letter day in the Royal Ballet's performance diary since the season was announced back in the spring. Any new production of a full evening ballet is sufficient to send a balletomane's heart aflutter, but who would have thought the Royal Ballet would import George Balanchine's autobiographical magnum opus, *Jewels*. Comprised of *Emeralds*, *Rubies* and *Diamonds*, it was the first full-length abstract ballet at the time of its creation in 1967. With each gemstone, Balanchine paid tribute to the nations that formed his character and his craft. The sensuous *Emeralds* for France, the cradle of ballet, where Balanchine achieved his first career triumph with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes; *Rubies*, the pizzazz and excess of post-war America, Balanchine's adopted home where he founded the New York City Ballet; and *Diamonds*, a glittering flash-back to his formative years in St Petersburg's Imperial Ballet School.

Legend has it that Balanchine found his inspiration for *Jewels* walking down New York's Fifth Avenue one wintry day. A suspicious saleswoman of jeweller Van Cleef & Arpels called up the owner from the vaults to check out the man who had been studying the display for longer than usual. The man turned out to be Balanchine and, during the conversation that followed, he suggested that the set of his next ballet be inspired by the jeweller's creations.

Van Cleef & Arpels did not underwrite the premiere as Balanchine had hoped, but Barbara Karinska's original costumes, recreated for the Royal Ballet's new production, do reflect the jeweller's uncanny ability to suggest movement in set-piece designs. The new staging by Jean-Marc Puissant contains recognisable elements of Paris's Palais Garnier, New York's State Theatre, and St Petersburg's Mariinsky Theatre.

What of the dancing? The Royal Ballet's exacting and lyrical style does not always make for a felicitous match with Balanchine's bold and athletic choreography created for tall, big-boned north-American dancers. On this showing our dancers prove themselves more than capable of Balanchine's technical demands, but the company as a whole hasn't quite managed to reach the heart of each ballet, at least not for the premiere.

Set to haunting music from Gabriel Fauré's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Shylock*, *Emeralds* was described by French ballerina Violette Verdy as Balanchine's homage to Impressionism, Degas, and Mélisande's Brittany. Tamara Rojo took on the lead role with her customary aplomb – luscious, ribbon-like arms complementing a pliant back disguising a steely anchor from the waist down. However, the overall impression of her interpretation was one of Parisian chic rather than the rustic, sea-scented free spirit that Balanchine's movements imply. Leanne Benjamin and her partner, Ivan Putrov, made little of their pas de deux, a minimalist, gossamer nocturne which sees two older lovers strolling to the music's tick-tock pulse. Only Steve McRae brought life to this raptly beautiful ballet, whose delicate balance between tranquility and vibrancy eluded some of our finest dancers.

However, they more than met the athletic cut and thrust of *Rubies*. Stravinsky's jazzy, motor-rhythmed Capriccio for Piano and Orchestra is the unexpectedly ideal soundtrack for Balanchine's impression of Manhattan's Broadway showgirls and high-kicking Rockettes. Ženaida Yanowsky couldn't help but command the stage as the "tall girl" who is ostensibly the hostess for an evening of debauchery. She writhed and zig-zagged around like a playful scorpion. The American Sarah Lamb was competent, though slightly faceless, in the central pas de deux. She approached the burlesque choreography with a forthright, can-do, let-legs-speak attitude that avoided vulgarity while at the same time whitewashing its playfulness. Carlos Acosta was a spirited partner and rode the steps with appropriate swagger, but he needed more time to develop the ease and lightness required for the role.

Diamonds is Balanchine's hymn to Suzanne Farrell, the 22-year-old ballerina with whom he was deeply in love at the time of its creation. In *Diamonds* the ballerina is "it": irresistible, intimidating, and ultimately unattainable. Alina Cojocaru's crystalline dancing and increasing authority made her the obvious choice for the Royal Ballet's first cast. Regal and passionate, she gave a heartfelt performance which ignited the rapture within Tchaikovsky's music. One could quibble about the over-earnestness with which she spiked her legs skywards or launched into every preparation, but mature reticence is an elusive quality that's best left alone rather than mishandled. Rupert Pennefather made for a noble if not quite imposing cavalier. The corps de ballet marched to the majestic finale with pomp and circumstance. After the final curtain bouquets rained down from the wings to celebrate a festive opening night that promises greater things to come.

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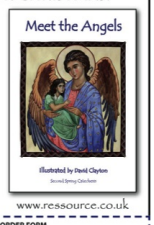

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